

DAWBARN (R.H.M.)

DOCTORS AND POLITICIANS,

BY

✓
ROBERT H. M. DAWBARN, M. D.,

Lecturer in Operative Surgery, New York Polyclinic.

A Series of Letters reprinted from the *Medical Record*, of December 7th, 1889,
and from several subsequent numbers of this Journal.



NEW YORK:

M. J. ROONEY & Co., PRINTERS AND STATIONERS,
COR. BROADWAY AND 35TH STREET.

DOCTORS AND POLITICIANS.

BY ROBERT H. M. DAWBARN, M.D.

Lecturer in Operative Surgery, New York Polyclinic.

A series of letters reprinted from the *Medical Record* of December 7th, 1889, and from several subsequent numbers of this journal.

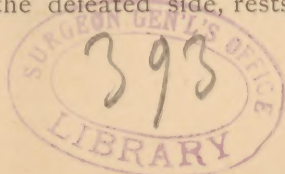
To the Editor of the Medical Record.

SIR:—In your issue for November 2d, I notice the following editorial paragraph: "It is well known that the state of civil service reform in New York is not what its friends could wish it to be; and that it would be well if some clear presentment of the facts were made by those who have had occasion to know best, as to the details and as to abuses—in the interests of better sanitation. It looks as if the only answer to the question was, 'What are you going to do about it?'"

Having had personal experience in the ways of alleged Civil Service Reform and its workings as applied to New York City, I have determined, in the interest of the medical fraternity, to respond to your appeal, hoping that some ultimate good may result therefrom.

It is evident to those who have had occasion to approach the machine that there is "something rotten in Denmark." Possibly a permanent coryza may afflict the members of the Civil Service Board, and they do not observe the stench. Possibly they are incompetent, or perhaps so occupied by other and to them more important cares and duties, that their subordinates have opportunities for disreputable acts which pass unobserved.

No one, I think, questions the personal honesty of the gentlemen who compose this board. But when a battle is fought, the responsibility, on the defeated side, rests with



the general in charge; and he cannot shift the load to other shoulders by complaining of a lack of efficiency or discipline in his subordinate officers. The simile holds good in the struggle between reform on the one hand, and political "pull" and "influence" on the other. The people have reason to be thoroughly dissatisfied with the commanding officers on the side of justice. They have been laggards in the fight, and should be replaced by men who are Argus-eyed: men not alone who are conscientious, but who also will put the same energy and determination into the cause of the right as are necessary to compass and maintain the success of any great business firm.

As to the politicians—we have no just reason for complaint. As found in New York they are "statesmen" for revenue only—for the money there is in it. To a man they hate the Civil Service laws, formulated to cut away their patronage by removing appointments from their hands. And as they find many a loophole of escape, they also despise these laws and the weak supporters thereof.

We have herein no cause for complaint, as we cannot expect assistance nor anything but keen antagonism from "our friends the enemy." He would be a fool or a coward who laments because the enemy does not give him aid. But we do have just cause for indignation when we find indifference, or something worse, within our own camp.

Let me speak only whereof I know. Concerning Civil Service as applied to others than medical men, I know nothing. But in respect to physicians I have had some experience which I now propose to lay before the profession.

And here let me say that I have no axe to grind. My own days of examinations are long past. Such personal grievance as I have had has not been hastily thrust before the public, either for sympathy or for any other reason. This must be admitted without argument, since my own experience dates back nearly five years; and yet not from that day until now have I published a word regarding the matter. Nor would I do so even now except for the hope that your editorial, serving as a text and an incentive, may

lead others to do likewise; and that together we may accomplish something more than one alone can do.

The first Civil Service examination for permanent positions for medical men, ever held in New York City, I believe, was that of February 3 and 4, 1885. There was a vacancy in the number of Police Surgeons owing to the death of a member of this corps. The position is a desirable one, being of certain tenure, and the salary being \$1,500 at first, later, \$2,250 per annum; with abundant time for private practice, as the duties are generally light.

This examination was duly and properly advertised beforehand in *The Medical Record* and *The Medical Journal*; and thirty-nine physicians, of whom I was one, competed for the appointment. We were examined for the greater part of two days upon the seven main branches of medicine, by three physicians selected by the board, as I was told, each to represent one of the three great medical colleges of this city.

In the event, I was so fortunate as to stand first, with a rating of one hundred per cent. in each of the branches. My friend Dr. Condict W. Cutler, then recently of Bellevue Hospital, stood second, with ninety-eight per cent.; and Dr. Charles S. Mack, then recently of Chambers Street Hospital, was third, with ninety-three per cent.

According to the law, the Police Commissioners should appoint one of the first three. In my innocence and freshness I actually supposed that the heads of the municipal police-force would do as they should do—that they would obey the law as a matter of course.

As I look back upon the affair, this belief—this child-like trust on my part in official honesty of intention—strikes me as most ludicrous and amusing. But at that time I really supposed that the result of Civil Service rules was to give the appointment to the candidate reaching the highest rating.

Time passed, and no appointment was made. At last, becoming worried, I took several letters of introduction from eminent business men and called upon the Police Commissioner—since retired from office—whose turn it was

to appoint (the four commissioners appoint in rotation).

I saw him alone in his room at Police Headquarters. He read my letters, also the paper announcing my standing. Then he said: "Civil Service Reform be damned! I will not, as we say, *hang you up*, but will tell you plainly that neither yourself nor any doctor who passed that examination will be appointed. I have promised that place to a doctor who did not take that examination, and after your period of eligibility has expired there will be another examination, and my man will go in."

If the commissioner had knocked me down he could not have surprised me more than he did by that speech. In reflecting upon it, I can only account for his surprising frankness by the remembrance that we were alone, and any subsequent repetition on my part would probably be met by a simple denial on his part, and there the matter must rest. Though I felt bitter enough at the time, I am now rather grateful to this rascal in one respect, for he might have *hung me up* (kept me in suspense by postponements and false promises) indefinitely, instead of giving me a prompt despatch, as he did.

I called next upon all the individual members of the Civil Service Board, gave a brief statement of the facts just narrated, offered to make affidavit thereunto, and asked them to endeavor to prevent such a wilful and contemptuous infraction of the spirit of the law, by prolonging the period of eligibility of successful candidates for medical positions until at least some one member of a given eligible list had received an appointment. This certainly was a reasonable request, and would, if carried into effect, have blocked the Police Commissioner's scheme to violate the law.

These gentlemen listened to me politely, seemed not to care about the matter particularly, and nearly a month later sent me a note, through the secretary of the board, stating that they would not take any action at present.

That ended the matter so far as my efforts were concerned. I did not appeal for justice to the public, because the use of the daily papers for such a purpose is not open to self-respecting physicians.

At length the time arrived—one year—when we who had passed that examination were no longer eligible. And, of a truth, none of that list were ever appointed. Shortly thereafter I heard that there had been another examination. Differing from the first, this examination was not, as it should have been, advertised in the medical journals. I am told that it was only advertised in the *City Record*, the official and legal organ of New York City appointments. Certain it is that not more than half as many doctors appeared at this examination as at the previous one, they being mainly those who had political friends to notify them. Very few of the first list were present, or had even heard of the second examination until it had actually been held.

Owing to the death of yet another Police Surgeon, during my year of eligibility, and to the fact that the commissioners now retired a couple of surgeons who were over sixty-two years of age, there were four vacancies. These were filled from this second eligible list, by selecting four men, one of whom was the physician who, as I have stated, had been promised the appointment more than a year before. This gentleman is the nephew of an eminent statesman, to whom the commissioner aforesaid was under obligations. (I would not have it supposed that he was unworthy. I have reason to believe him an excellent physician.) Another appointee was a close relation by marriage to the leader of one of the city political factions; and this leader secured his appointment. The remaining places went to two men who had served in the army during the war. They were both near the foot of the list, having shown a poor standing. But the commissioners in this case had no choice, the law being mandatory regarding veterans of the late war.

The two candidates who had stood highest upon this eligible list, respectively, Drs. Charles E. Quimby and Condict W. Cutler, not having enough "pull," were ignored, passed over, and never received an appointment.

Some little good to others came out of my own discomfiture, in this wise: I wrote the Hon. John Jay, Chairman of the State Civil Service Board, saying that it

seemed to me only courteous that all the successful candidates of a given examination should be specially notified, when their eligibility has expired without appointment, of the time and place of the next examination.

Mr. Jay in his reply stated that he agreed with me, and would endeavor to have this point carried into effect throughout the State. This, I am told, has since been done.

Between the time of which I have been writing—1885 and thereabout—and the present date, I have heard from various sources, authentic, I believe, occasional reports of medical appointments to our city departments of which we cannot be proud. During these years I have had quite a number of applicants for quizzing in preparation for the city Civil Service medical examinations; and I have always advised the gentlemen in question, as in conscience bound, not to waste their time. If they have a "pull," seventy per cent.—the under limit—will suffice. If they have not a "pull," a higher per cent. will not avail anything.

It may perhaps interest your readers to know of the latest proof of the kind whereof I speak. I give it with the brief preface, that it is only a fair assumption that it is not the only case of its sort. There are probably others of which I do not happen to know.

Dr. A B C, a former student of mine, did not, until after the fact, hear of the examination held this summer for the "Summer Corps" of physicians to assist the regular corps of the Board of Health. He was but a day or two late, and determined to try political influence. In this he was successful, for a well-known city official, of his own language and religious belief, procured for him a copy of the questions, which he answered at his leisure, at home, and doubtless to his own satisfaction. His paper was then duly handed to his political friend, was slipped in among the other papers, and in a short time he received his appointment as a member of the "Summer Corps," in which he remained throughout the season.

I have reason to believe what the doctor said to me. In

the first place, he had no reason for deceiving me. But, aside from this, I know that he was elsewhere when the regular examination was held, and I know also that he was, nevertheless, in the Summer Corps.

If it should be said that I owe it to the profession to report, publicly, the names of such flagrant violators of the law, I can only reply that I would gladly do so ; but that this and such other instances as have come to my notice were told in confidence, which, although unsought on my part, I cannot break.

I presume that the Civil Service Board will find it easier and simpler to disbelieve my statements than to keep that sharp watch over the *personnel* of their department and the purity of their "reform" which they devote to their private finances.

The medical profession in this country seldom bestirs itself in public matters even where its own weal is concerned. More is the pity. We can hardly expect others to show a greater interest in our own affairs than we ourselves display.

If such a large body of educated men as the physicians of New York were really to take some concerted action, and maintain it loyally, what could they not accomplish in the way of abating political abuses? If a standing committee, wisely selected, from the Academy of Medicine, or the County Society, or both, should make earnest and continued endeavor, perhaps the public at large might come to understand—as an example—that their lives might be better protected against plague and pestilence than at present; that the health-officer to a great port should be one in fact, and not alone in name: one who has demonstrated some ability in preventive medicine, not one who is selected solely for political and partisan reasons—his office being merely a source of revenue to his party.

It may be, too, that such a fighting committee might succeed in wiping from our name the stain and reproach which is conveyed in the exclusion of a physician and the appointment always of some politician as the head of our Board of Health. Even such serious matters as life and

death have their ludicrous side at times; and what could be more grotesque and worthy of comic opera than debarring a medical man from the head of a department which absolutely demands for the protection of our citizens a thorough medical training?

It would be well for our standing committee to keep an eye upon the Civil Service Commissioners with regard to the various medical examinations, and the resulting appointments. Such scrutiny would not be pleasant for these gentlemen, but, in view of the facts, who shall say that it would be time ill-spent?

I am told that the board have not always been wise in their selection of physicians as medical examiners. That is a matter wherein, necessarily, their judgment cannot be of the best. It would be a modest and becoming admission of fallibility on their part if they would request the Academy—for instance—to name responsible and able men, annually, for this purpose; and these examiners should endeavor to give their examinations as practical a cast as possible.

And finally, one—possibly two—further reforms are needed in our vaunted Reform. First, the man who heads the successful list should be the man appointed; and the wording of the law should make this inevitable. Otherwise, as now, the thing is a farce and a sham reform.

Regarding the second, I speak with much hesitation. It has reference to the preferment of veterans over men who may have been shown by the examination-test to be the more able physicians.

I would not have it thought for a moment that I do not feel hearty respect and admiration for these brave men, as every true American must do. And I sympathize with the public sentiment which shows them honor in every proper way. But is this a proper way? I would not be dogmatic. Perhaps my views herein are wrong ones. But reflection would seem to show that this clause is an excrescence in Civil Service laws. So far from being a proper part of them this provision seems to me to antagonize directly the theory on which the whole fabric of examination rests;

which is, as I understand it, that the man of greatest demonstrated fitness is the proper man. Sympathy, gratitude, admiration of personal bravery, or other emotion, is quite foreign to the matter. If it be objected that the veteran should nevertheless be appointed because examination is often a fallacious test of real ability—which is, up to the present time, certainly the truth—that is largely the fault of the examiner and the kind of examination. It could be made a very fair test, if sufficiently practical and not too brief and hurried.

It is probably expecting too much to hope for a change for some years to come in the law regarding veterans. And it is very probable that some of your readers would support the present law, and disapprove any change in this regard. As I have said, this may well be considered ground for amicable difference of opinion. But in all other respects I feel sure of the earnest concurrence of a united profession in what I have indicated as a line of true reform.

Very respectfully,

ROBERT H. M. DAWBARN, M. D.

345 West Fifty-sixth Street, New York.

In the *Medical Record* of December 21st were published two letters. That of Mr. Ackerman I reproduce here, together with my reply, in which Dr. Peterson's letter also receives such attention as it requires :

To the Editor of the Medical Record.

SIR :—My attention has been called to the following paragraph, clipped from your issue of December 7, 1889 :
 * * * * “ Dr. A. B. C., a former student of mine, did not, until after the fact, hear of the examination held this summer for the ‘ Summer Corps ’ of physicians to assist the regular corps of the Board of Health. He was but a day or two late, and determined to try political influence. In this he was successful, for a well-known city official, of his own language and religious belief, procured for him a copy of the

questions, which he answered at his leisure, at home, and doubtless to his own satisfaction. His paper was then duly handed to his political friend, was slipped in among the other papers, and in a short time he received his appointment as a member of the 'Summer Corps,' in which he remained throughout the season. * * * *

"(Signed) ROBERT H. M. DAWBARN, M.D.,
 "345 West Fifty-sixth Street, New York."

Will you kindly permit me space to characterize this statement as utterly false?

Respectfully yours,

G. K. ACKERMAN,

Secretary and Executive Officer.

New York City Civil Service Boards, Cooper Union,
 New York, December 16, 1889.

(Reprinted from the *Medical Record*, Dec. 28, 1889.)

To the Editor of the Medical Record.

SIR :—During the weeks which have followed the publication of my letter concerning Civil Service matters, in the *Record* of Dec. 7th, I have received many communications from physicians, both in New York and places far away. The writers have gratified me exceedingly by upholding heartily the position I there took regarding certain municipal medical abuses; and in several instances they referred to other and additional Civil Service obliquities which they had experienced. I wish these gentlemen would publish in this journal the same statements which they have made in private. Such public evidence of approval would doubtless help in abating the abuses of which we are all aware.

To those gentlemen whose kindly messages I have received, but through stress of work have not answered, I take this means of tendering my thanks and my appreciation.

In the latest number of the *Record* there appear letters from Dr. Frederick Peterson and Mr. G. K. Ackerman.

Regarding the first, it interested me, as I had not before heard of the examination in 1884 for a chief-assistant physician's position in the State Asylum for the Insane, which this gentleman so creditably passed. However, my paper referred to New York *City* (not State) examinations; and so far as these are concerned, my statements were, I think, correct.

Perhaps the profession would have been more interested, and some good might have resulted, if, instead of devoting an entire article of more than a column to the details of his examination and to laudation thereof, the doctor had said just a few words regarding present examinations—inefficient because hasty and not practical—and their accompanying political queerness.

Regarding Mr. Ackerman:—This gentleman, in his communication mentioned, cuts out a portion of my published letter, and pronounces it a falsehood. This he does with such emphasis and brevity as to be equivalent to saying “damn!”—and that is all.

The portion to which he refers was, as I stated, simply a quotation on my part, which I have reason for thinking true. How it will surprise and even sadden the doctor who told me how he attained the “Summer Corps” when he learns that Mr. Ackerman contradicts him!

In the *Evening Post* of Dec. 17th is an interview with Mr. Ackerman, in which this gentleman practically admits the more important of the alleged facts, barring the taking of the papers home by the doctor. That is, he admits that a certain few physicians were allowed a special examination a day or two later than the regular one.

If a certain one or two are as a favor allowed to take their examination a day or two days later than that of the vulgar herd, and are—as we are informed—asked the same questions as the latter, what fairness is there in this arrangement? Even if different questions are asked, what fairness? It is, for obvious reasons, a simple travesty on a competitive examination, and the political cloven hoof is apparent.

If the men who were allowed a later examination in this instance were *not* asked the same questions as the others,

it ought to be easy for Mr. Ackerman to prove this by allowing to reporters free access to the examination-papers written both by these favored doctors, whose names were given in the *Evening Post*, and by the rest of the class.

I have no personal quarrel with Mr. Ackerman. He is probably a politician of much probity; and therefore there are a few points on which, in common with many other physicians, I find myself puzzled.

Will not some other among the professional readers of the *Record* add his personal quota to the problem under discussion, as, at the request of the editor, I have done?

Very respectfully,

ROBERT H. M. DAWBARN, M.D.

345 West Fifty-sixth Street, New York.

[*Editorial from the "Medical Record," January 4th, 1890.*]

MEDICINE AND THE CIVIL SERVICE.

The letters of Dr. Dawbarn and our other correspondents regarding the competitive examinations of the Civil Service have excited considerable interest and comment. All who have read this correspondence will, we think, agree that while Civil Service examinations may have been imperfectly and unfairly conducted in some departments, yet it is not the system which is at fault, but its misapplication at the hands of politicians. The appointment of medical men in the Civil Service, solely on political grounds, has for years been a source of scandal and disgrace. Physicians should therefore encourage the thorough enforcement and wider application of the law. On the other hand, some of those who are at present engaged in carrying out this law seem unduly sensitive to criticism, although they are by no means above it. We are quite convinced of the essential accuracy of Dr. Dawbarn's statements. It has long been known that the methods of appointment of police surgeons have been essentially political.

In the *Medical Record* for January 18, 1890, appears the following letter from Mr. G. K. Ackerman. Those who

have read the foregoing letters attentively will indeed sympathize with him in his evident annoyance. I print what he has to say, knowing that he would wish it.

Mr. Ackerman was secretary during the recent episode which we have been discussing. He was appointed, as he herein states, on April 1st. As to date, this was neither auspicious nor felicitous, but regrettable. I feel for him; and in his behalf let me say, that we should not hold him, but his superiors in office, responsible. Out of his own mouth they stand convicted of allowing him to use unfair and improper practices in Civil Service examinations. This was shown in my last letter to the *Record*. And if they still remain complacent, why should his heart be troubled?

Evidently, however, he has felt that my letter or the recent editorial in the *Record* compels him to say something. Under such unhappy circumstances he speaks. And as his letter contains no arguments or proofs at all, being merely his previous effort made a trifle longer, I do not answer it, but willingly give him the last word.

ROBERT H. M. DAWBARN.

Mr. Ackerman's Letter.

MEDICAL CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATIONS.

To the Editor of the Medical Record.

SIR:—I do not believe that any controversy between Dr. Robert H. M. Dawbarn and myself will be of any interest either to yourself or the readers of your journal. Dr. Dawbarn's grievance as to his candidacy some years ago for a medical position has no interest for me, and his strictures upon the methods of conducting Civil Service examinations, being simply his opinions as against those of gentlemen who have given much time and thought to these matters, and whose reputation, character, and knowledge are unimpeachable, are not much more interesting.

But Dr. Dawbarn's charge that a candidate came to this office and procured a set of questions, took them home,

and answered them there at his leisure, being a plain and palpable violation of law, if true, deserves the fullest punishment of the law.

This charge, it appears, is made by Dr. Dawbarn, not upon any knowledge he has upon the subject, but upon the mere say-so of a candidate who is now in Europe. When he returns, Dr. Dawbarn may depend upon it that the charge will be proved or retracted.

I have been connected with the Civil Service of this city since the first day of April, 1889. I have endeavored to treat every candidate, whether professional or lay, with courtesy and fairness, and I would be glad to hear of any case since that time where any candidate has been dealt with in any other way.

The editor of the *Medical Record*, or any physician, will be welcome to any examination of the system, working, and records of this office at any time, whether he may have a grievance or not.

Respectfully,

G. K. ACKERMAN,

Secretary.

New York City Civil Service Boards, Cooper Union,
New York, January 13, 1890.



